

Notice of Determination

Appendix D

To:
[] Office of Planning and Research
U.S. Mail: Street Address:
P.O. Box 3044 1400 Tenth St., Rm 113
Sacramento, CA 95812-3044 Sacramento, CA 95814

[] County Clerk
County of: Lassen
Address: 220 S. Lassen St., Annex
Susanville, CA 96130

From:
Public Agency: Honey Lake Valley RCD
Address: 1516 Main Street
Susanville, CA 96130
Contact: Kelsey Siemer
Phone: (530) 260-0067

Lead Agency (if different from above):
Address:
Contact: JULIE BUSTAMANTE
LASSEN COUNTY CLERK
Phone: By [Signature], Deputy

FILED

JAN 31 2025

SUBJECT: Filing of Notice of Determination in compliance with Section 21108 or 21152 of the Public Resources Code.

State Clearinghouse Number (if submitted to State Clearinghouse): 2024040088

Project Title: Lassen County Wildfire Recovery Project Lassen County, California

Project Applicant: Lassen County Fire Safe Council, Inc

Project Location (include county): Lassen County

Project Description:

The project objective is to restore up to 28,650 acres of private non-industrial timber and woodlands that were damaged by the Hog Fire (2020), Sheep Fire (2020), and the Dixie Fire (2021), through removal of standing dead biomass, replanting of areas with conifers and oak seedlings, and addressing erosion and hydrologic issues.

This is to advise that the Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District has approved the above ([] Lead Agency or [] Responsible Agency)

described project on 5/23/2024 and has made the following determinations regarding the above (date) described project.

- 1. The project [] will [] will not] have a significant effect on the environment.
2. [] An Environmental Impact Report was prepared for this project pursuant to the provisions of CEQA. [] A Negative Declaration was prepared for this project pursuant to the provisions of CEQA.
3. Mitigation measures [] were [] were not] made a condition of the approval of the project.
4. A mitigation reporting or monitoring plan [] was [] was not] adopted for this project.
5. A statement of Overriding Considerations [] was [] was not] adopted for this project.
6. Findings [] were [] were not] made pursuant to the provisions of CEQA.

This is to certify that the final EIR with comments and responses and record of project approval, or the negative Declaration, is available to the General Public at:

1516 Main Street, Susanville, CA 96130; https://ceqanet.opr.ca.gov/

Signature (Public Agency): [Signature] Title: Chairman

Date: 1/30/2025 Date Received for filing at OPR:

**Initial Study-Mitigated Negative Declaration
for the proposed
Lassen County Wildfire Recovery Project
Lassen County, California**




Prepared by:

**Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District
Lassen County, CA**

May 2024

FILED

JAN 31 2025

**JULIE BUSTAMANTE
LASSEN COUNTY CLERK**
By  Deputy

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MITIGATED NEGATIVE DECLARATION

Introduction and Regulatory Context

STAGE OF CEQA DOCUMENT DEVELOPMENT

- Administrative Draft.** This California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) document is in preparation by Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District (HLVRCD) staff.
- Public Document.** This completed CEQA document has been filed by the Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District (HLV RCD) at the State Clearinghouse on March 29, 2024, and is being circulated for a 30-day state agency and public review period. The review period ends on April 27, 2024.
- Final CEQA Document.** This final CEQA document contains the changes made by the RCD following consideration of comments received during the public and agency review period. The CEQA administrative record supporting this document is on file, and available for review, at Honey Lake Valley RCD, 170 Russell Ave., Susanville, CA 96130.

INTRODUCTION

This initial study-mitigated negative declaration (IS-MND) describes the environmental impact analysis conducted for the proposed project. This document was prepared by HLVRCD staff utilizing information gathered from a number of sources including research, field review of the proposed project area and consultation with environmental planners and other experts on staff at other public agencies. Pursuant to § 21082.1 of CEQA, the lead agency, HLVRCD, has prepared, reviewed, and analyzed the IS-MND and declares that the statements made in this document reflect HLVRCD's independent judgment as lead agency pursuant to CEQA. HLVRCD further finds that the proposed project, which includes revised activities and mitigation measures designed to minimize environmental impacts, will not result in a significant effect on the environment.

REGULATORY GUIDANCE

This IS-MND has been prepared by HLVRCD to evaluate potential environmental effects that could result following approval and implementation of the proposed project. This document has been prepared in accordance with current CEQA Statutes (Public Resources Code §21000 *et seq.*) and current CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations [CCR] §15000 *et seq.*)

An initial study is prepared by a lead agency to determine if a project may have a significant effect on the environment (14 CCR § 15063(a)), and thus, to determine the appropriate environmental document. In accordance with CEQA Guidelines §15070, a "public agency shall prepare...a proposed negative declaration or mitigated negative declaration...when: (a) The initial study shows that there is no substantial evidence...that the project may have a significant impact upon the environment, or (b) The initial study identifies potentially significant effects but revisions to the project plans or proposal are agreed to by the applicant and such revisions will reduce potentially significant effects to a less-than-significant level." In this circumstance, the lead agency prepares a written statement describing its reasons for concluding that the proposed project will not have a

significant effect on the environment and, therefore, does not require the preparation of an environmental impact report. This IS-MND conforms to these requirements and to the content requirements of CEQA Guidelines § 15071.

PURPOSE OF THE INITIAL STUDY

The purpose of this IS-MND is to present to the public and reviewing agencies the environmental consequences of implementing the proposed project and to describe the adjustments made to the project to avoid significant effects or reduce them to a less-than-significant level. This disclosure document is being made available to the public and reviewing agencies for review and comment. The IS-MND was circulated for public and state agency review and comment for a review period of 30 days as indicated on the *Notice of Intent to Adopt a Mitigated Negative Declaration* (NOI). The 30-day public review period for this project began on April 2, 2024 and ended on May 1, 2024.

The requirements for providing an NOI are found in CEQA Guidelines §15072. These guidelines require HLVRCDC to notify the general public by providing the NOI to the county clerk for posting, sending the NOI to those who have requested it, and utilizing at least one of the following three procedures:

- Publication in a newspaper of general circulation in the area affected by the proposed project,
- Posting the NOI on and off site in the area where the project is to be located, or
- Direct mailing to the owners and occupants of property contiguous to the project.

HLVRCDC elected to utilize posting the NOI on and off site in the area where the project is to be located, the second of the three notification options. An electronic version of the NOI and the CEQA document were available for review during the entire 30-day review period through their posting at: <https://www.honeylakevalleyrcd.us/> , and the project will be posted on <https://ceqanet.opr.ca.gov/> .

If submitted prior to the close of public comment, views and comments were welcomed from reviewing agencies or any member of the public on how the proposed project may affect the environment. Written comments must be postmarked or submitted on or prior to the date the public review period will close (as indicated on the NOI) for HLVRCDC's consideration. Written comments may also be submitted via email (using the email address that appears below), but comments sent via email must also be received on or prior to the close of the 30-day public comment period. Comments should be addressed to:

Kelsey Siemer, Distinct Manager
Honey Lake Valley Resource Conservation District
170 Russell Ave., Suite C
Susanville, CA 96130
(530) 260-0067
kmarks@honeylakevalleyrcd.us

After comments are received from the public and reviewing agencies, HLVRCDC will consider those comments and may (1) adopt the mitigated negative declaration and approve the proposed project; (2) undertake additional environmental studies; or (3) abandon the project.

Project Description and Environmental Setting

PROJECT LOCATION

The project area is located on +/-27,750 acres of non-industrial private timberlands, woodlands, and sagebrush scrub in Lassen County, CA impacted by the Hog Fire (220), Sheep Fire (2020), Sugar Fire (2021), and Dixie Fire (2021). The project area is within the: Pine Lake (8637.310101); Upper Robbers Creek (5518.450102); Moonlight Pass (5518.450400); Papoose Creek (8637.200201); Goat Mountain (8637.200202); Lower Willard Creek (8637.200302); Cheney Creek (8637.200400); Upper Gold Run (8637.200803); Lower Gold Run (8637.200801); Lassen Creek (8637.200802); Sand Slough (8637.200901); Wales Canyon (8637.200904); McDermott Creek (8637.100.307); Clarks Creek (5518.550201); Bird Canyon (8637.100305); Downing Canyon (8637.100304); Willow Ranch Creek (8637.100303); Rhodesi Creek (8637.100301); Red Rock (8637.100308); and Raccoon Creek (8637.100202) watersheds.

Mount Diablo Base and Meridian (MDBM) Township 23N, Range 17E, portions of Sections 2-5, 8-10; T24N, R17E, portions of Sections 4,5,8-11, 13-16, 24-26, 34, & 35; T25N, R17E, portions of Sections 7, 17-20, & 29-33; T25, R16, portions of Sections 2,3,9-16, 22-26, & 36; T26N, R15, Section 13; T26N, R16E, portions of Sections 18-20, 28,29, 32-34; T27N, 13E, portions of Sections 1, 3,10,12 & 15; T27, R14, portions of Sections 5-8, 17, & 20; T28N, R13E, portions of Section 23, 26-27, & 36; T28, R14E, portions of Sections 30, 31;T29N, R10E, portions of Sections 1,22; T29N, R11E, portions of Sections 7,12, 22-26, 33 & 35; T29N, R12E, portions of Sections 19, 20, 22-24, & 27-34; T30N, R8E, portions of Sections 2,3,8; T30N, R10E, portions of Section 27; and T31, R7, portions of Sections 13,24, & 25.

The project area ranges in slope from flat to very steep with elevation ranges from 4,000 – 6,800 feet, and average annual precipitation of 12 inches at the lower elevations on the east side of the project to 55 inches in the higher elevations of the project. The project area lies within a wildland urban interface zone (WUI), which is an area where human habitation is mixed with areas of flammable wildland vegetation. The majority of the project area burned at medium to high severity during the Hog, Sheep, Sugar, and Dixie Fires in 2020 and 2021.

BACKGROUND AND NEED FOR THE PROJECT

The Hog Fire began on July 18, 2020 from an unknown source and was contained by Cal Fire on August 17, 2020. The wildfire burned 6,621 private acres and a little over 2,946 on federally-managed lands for a total of 9,567 acres. The Sheep Fire was a lightning-caused wildfire that burned 9,134 acres of federally-managed land in the Diamond Mountains and spread onto 19,023 acres of private land at the base of the mountains toward the city of Susanville, CA. The Sheep Fire began in the lightning siege on August 17, 2020 and spread across Plumas into Lassen County burning federal (Forest Service) and private land until September 4, 2020. The Sugar Fire started on July 2, 2021 and was part of the Beckwourth complex started by lightning strikes, and was contained on September 22, 2021. The combined fires burned 105,670 acres, and destroyed 33 homes in the community of Doyle, CA. The Dixie Fire began on July 13, 2021 by a PG&E powerline and was contained on October, 25,2021. The wildfire burned 963,309 acres. It was the largest single source wildfire in recorded California history. The communities of Greenville, Canyondam, and Warner Springs. The Lassen County Wildfire Recovery project areas were

primarily comprised of upland Eastside Pine (EPN) stands with Jeffrey and ponderosa pine as the dominant conifer vegetation along with Sierran Mixed Conifer (SMC) consisting of pine, Douglas fir, white fir, sugar pine, incense cedar, and Black oak. There are also areas of Montane Hardwood Conifer (MHC) consisting of ponderosa pine, incense cedar, and California black oak. Understory vegetation was thick in portions of the project area prior to the fire with brush including, bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*) and sagebrush (*Artemisia sp.*). Areas of unburned eastside pine and Sierran mixed conifer forest remain within the fire footprint and adjacent areas and are overly dense with high levels of ladder fuels, primarily white fir, in the understory. The project is needed to remove the abundant standing, fire-killed trees adjacent to these areas to reduce fire risk. Restoration of vegetation within the project is needed to remove dead and dying vegetation and restore these areas in a way that provides safe conditions for fire fighters and safety personnel to fight future catastrophic wildfires threatening the communities of Westwood, Lake Forest, Susanville, and Janesville.

The project is also needed to address the potential for increased surface runoff and erosion post-fires. The Plumas and Lassen National Forests prepared Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) Reports reviewing the severity and likelihood of post-fire disasters. These reports are used as a proxy for post-fire conditions on all lands within the fire footprints. The majority of all the burned areas resulting from these burned at moderate to high soil severity. Due to hillslope gradient and loss of vegetation, the first, large runoff-producing storms resulted in increased surface flows in many streams within the fire footprints.

Threats to hydrologic function and water quality are considered very high due to the likelihood of: degraded channel condition and bank erosion from increased flows; the potential for significant sediment contributions; reduction in water quality; increased runoff resulting in higher concentrations of runoff on roads, resulting in exacerbated erosion of road fill slopes; and surrounding land; increased flooding and potential for debris flows.

Currently, the remaining fire-killed trees pose risk to life and property by increasing fuel loading. The project area has high densities of dead and dying trees, especially in areas of high-severity burn. Increased fuel loading may extend resident burn times, increase flame length, increase fire heat and soil damage, and increase firefighter labor to suppress the fire (difficulty moving in jack-strawed or dense downed wood material). If not felled and removed, these trees will elevate fire hazard and impede fire suppression. Management of activity-related slash and smaller fuels and removal of logs would reduce the severity and intensity of the next fire, create a safe and defensible space for firefighters in future advancing fires, and provide for safer ingress and egress. Delays in decision-making and implementation will likely lead to loss of the most intensely burned area to cycles of shrubs, hardwoods, and recurring fires for many decades (Sessions et al. 2004).

Not all downed logs and woody biomass pose a serious fire hazard or impede safe and effective fire suppression. Downed woody biomass provides both ecological and recreational values. Therefore, our objective is to remove enough of the dead/dying fuels to support low fire-hazard and low resistance-to-control conditions and to retain biomass and logs where soil cover or habitat is insufficient after fires.

An effective balance between these competing objectives may be met by felling, but not removing, some hazard trees in treated areas and by entirely foregoing treatment in other areas. In the areas selected for treatment, some felled hazard trees may be left on the forest floor, as long as downed

woody biomass does not constitute a residual safety hazard, increase fuel loading above desired levels, or pose a significant impediment to economic and operational efficiency.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project objective is to restore areas on private non-industrial timber and woodlands that were damaged by the Hog Fire (2020), Sheep Fire (2020), and the Dixie Fire (2021), address erosion and hydrologic issues, and replant areas with conifer and oak seedlings.

PROJECT START DATE

Summer 2024

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project will result in up to 28,650 acres of private non-industrial timberlands and woodlands receiving site preparation to remove dead and dying trees and shrubs and regrowth of competing vegetation resulting from the Hog, Sheep, Sugar, and Dixie Fires, planting of seedlings to reforest areas prepped as a result of this project and other areas previously cleared by private landowners. The project proposes removal of standing dead biomass material for site preparation in burned stands of Eastside Pine (EPN), Sierra Mixed Conifer (SMC), and Montane Hardwood Conifer (MHC) habitats (*See Project Vicinity and Project Area Map*). Clearing dead and dying trees which will fall down over time and become a fuel hazard to the reforested area is a key step in ensuring successful regeneration and protecting the investment from reburning. Long-term, downed fire-killed trees inhibit reforestation treatments, increase watershed degradation, decompose and increase fuel loads for a highly probable reburn event. Both occurrences release excess greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Projects will be implemented within the project area over several years as funding becomes available.

Site preparation will begin as soon as possible and will remain continuous as weather permits. Variable prescriptions will be applied to promote Habitat Retention Areas (HRA). HRAs will be established to preserve some snag and thicket structure where appropriate. Up to 10% of the total area would be left untreated as HRA. The largest tree snags (over 18" DBH) will be left onsite for habitat value. Steep areas (>40% slope) will not be treated. To complete site preparation, all areas cleared will have follow-up herbicide treatment to remove resprouting woody vegetation and grasses from competition with the new conifer seedlings. Herbicide treatments will occur in early summer to fall. Watercourses and springs will be buffered per herbicide label requirements.

The spring after site preparation, trees will be planted. Variable density silviculture prescriptions will be used to promote a mixture of tree sizes and structural diversity throughout the project area. "Islands" of area will be established using native plant seed. These seeded patches will vary in size, from two up to ten acres. The seed mix is certified weed free and composed of native grasses, forbs, and brush. Seed will be broadcast in the fall. Residual stands will be more open, increasing the amount of available soil moisture and sunlight for individual trees. Allowing some shrub cover in regenerating forests, in balance with tree seedlings, will increase the resilience and habitat diversity of reforested areas. Erosion control will be installed on disturbed areas and all roads used for hauling and yarding per Forest Practice Rules (14 CCR §943).

Much of the thinning activity and removal of trees >11" dbh will be conducted under California Forest Practice Exemptions. The balance of the treatment activities, including the mastication of brush and small trees, hand treatments of brush and small trees, prescribed fire, herbicide treatments, and tree planting will be conducted under this Notice of Exemption (NOE).

1.1. Mastication and Hand Treatment of Brush and Small Trees

Mastication and hand treatments involve the pulverization and removal of standing dead/dying biomass. Dead/dying trees and brush that are over 18" in height and less than 11" diameter at breast height (dbh) will be treated. Brush greater than 18" in height will be treated. Snags less than 12" dbh will be treated, unless they show signs of use by wildlife or are marked with an "L", "W", or tag identifying them as a "Wildlife Tree". Woody debris less than 12" diameter which extends greater than 12" from the ground will be treated. Areas with concentrations of activity fuels (i.e. logging slash) will be treated. Treated materials will not extend greater than 12" from the ground.

Good form should be considered when selecting leave trees in order to reduce the number of trees with crooks, doglegs, multiple tops, or other defects. Trees exhibiting poor vigor, mechanical damage, or disease and or insect infestation shall not be retained unless they are the best available tree. Trees that have a likelihood of creating a "ladder" for fire to move into the crowns of overstory trees have a lower priority as leave trees. Trees that do not exceed the maximum size and that are within 10' of roads that have the potential to affect vehicular traffic use or to allow a fire to spread across the road shall be treated. Leave trees will be prioritized in the following order: 1) incense cedar; 2) Douglas fir, 3) sugar pine, 4)ponderosa pine; 5)white fir, and 6) western juniper. Oaks and other hardwoods showing signs of stump sprouting will be retained.

1.2. Emergent Brush Treatments:

Emergent brush treatment involves the use of herbicides to treat emergent vegetation in order to remove competition from planted conifer seedlings and maintain forest spacing established by the mastication and hand thinning.

After brushfields and dense tree stands are cleared, native and non-native woody species aggressively reoccupy the site, regardless of the method of initial brush removal. The regrowth is typically from both old, vigorously sprouting plants and new dense stands of small seedlings, but in certain situations either seedlings or sprouts alone make up most of the regrowth. Control of this brush regrowth has been the most persistent and perplexing problem in converting dense stands of small diameter, unhealthy trees and shrubs that are subject to stand replacing and dangerous fire conditions to productive timber stands that can withstand a low to medium intensity fire and provide increased wildfire protection to communities. Sprouts from previously dormant buds on root crowns, stems, or roots left after initial brush removal have been most difficult to control. Herbicides have been shown to be an efficient cost-effective method of meeting this objective.

The following alternatives were considered, in addition to the one selected, and were disregarded for the following reasons:

1) Do Nothing. Loss of vegetation control investments, loss of property values due to associated fire hazard, and watershed impacts from anticipated wildfire.

2) Mechanical or Manual Treatment. Mechanical and manual treatments alone are not cost effective and would require multiple re-entries to re-treat the re-sprouting brush. This method

would result in scarification of additional weed seeds that would result in ongoing germinate brush.

3) Biological Treatment. There is no known effective biological treatment. Cattle and sheep are grazers and not browsers and would not effectively forage on the target brush species. Goats are browsers and could be used to forage on the target brush species; however, the brush would re-sprout resulting in the need for ongoing treatments. There are very few goat herds available for brush control in the region. Goats can be very selective on which brush species they will browse.

4) Other Herbicides. Of the herbicides registered for this use, these were determined to be the most appropriate when considering cost-effectiveness and safety to desirable crop trees and the environment.

All vegetation control shall be with the use of herbicides. The landowner does not have any other cost-effective alternative to consider. Herbicide use will be limited to late winter (February – March) prior to the flowering period, and fall (October – November), after the flowering period, in order to protect pollinators. Herbicides with the EPA bee hazard icon, or high residual toxicity to bees, will not be used, and flowering plants will be avoided.

1.3. Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire is a very cost and time efficient management tool. The native species within the project boundary have all evolved with and are adapted to frequent fire intervals. Using low intensity, more frequent prescribed fires allows native species to thrive and can also reduce invasive species populations. Prescribed burning, in this project, will be used to reduce the fuel load of ground fuels, coarse woody debris, as well as a portion of the above ground biomass. The purpose of the fire is to reduce the risk of large damaging fires by creating conditions that increase effectiveness of fire suppression.

Through prescribed fire, land managers can have a say in the timing and intensity of the fire. Land managers can also lessen the impacts or provide benefits for other environmental resources. Fire hazard reduction may be an objective of prescribed fire; however, there are other objectives such as wildlife habitat improvement, range improvement, enhancement of the project areas appearance, and improved safety by reducing the amount of dead and dying vegetation. If a wildfire does happen to enter an area that was treated, the wildfire may be contained sooner with reduced area burned at high intensity. The reduced number of acres or fire intensity will have benefits to other resource, including environmental resources, public health, and public and firefighter safety.

All prescribed fires will be subject to local and state regulation to maintain air quality and reduce fire escape risk. Prescribed burning is regulated by the Lassen County Air Pollution Control District (LCAPCD) in compliance with the state smoke management plan, Title 17. Prescribed burn projects must submit a Smoke Management Plan to LCAPCD for review and approval. The plan is developed to minimize air quality impacts of the project. Burning is done on approved burn days as determined by LCAPCD. This process ensures that there are no significant smoke impacts to public health from the project.

The desired fire intensity is low to moderate. A prescribed burn plan will be developed for prescribed fires within the project area prior to implementation that outlines the parameters (timing,

weather, fuel moisture, etc.) necessary to implement the project to ensure that the fire remains low to moderate intensity and does not escape the project perimeter. In addition the plan will identify protocols should the fire escape. All prescribed fire activities carry a risk of fire escape, but the project design has reduced this risk below a significant level. By conducting burns in the off-season and with highly trained fire professionals (CAL FIRE) on site, the project reduces the risk of wildfire below the level of risk associated with the no-project alternative. Spotting outside of fire lines should not be a problem with correct firing methods and weather patterns as prescribed in the burn plan. By reducing fuels while leaving slope and other factors unchanged, the project will reduce, not exacerbate the effects of any future wildfire.

1.4. Erosion Control

Erosion control may include reseeded with native seed for stabilization of degraded areas and installation of brow logs to trap sediment from entering waterways. Erosion control will be installed on disturbed areas and all roads used for hauling and yarding per Forest Practice Rules (14 CCR §934 and §943).

1.5. Tree Planting

Bare root/containerized seedlings from the appropriate seed zone (523, 732, and 771) will be hand planted when soils are moist, not saturated or dry. Variable density silviculture prescriptions will be used to promote a mixture of tree sizes and structural diversity throughout the project area.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING OF THE PROJECT REGION

The project area is located in a region where the Southern Cascades Mountain Range, Northern Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, Modoc Plateau, and Great Basin ecoregions merge. These regions are the ancestral home of the Maidu, Northern Paiute, Pit River, and Washoe Tribes and represented today by several bands within the county and surrounding areas. Members of those bands continue to maintain a relationship with this landscape as a place of residence, ceremony, harvesting, stewardship, and other traditional activities. The region has cold winters, and hot summers with variability in annual precipitation as you move from mountainous forested regions on the west toward the dry, high desert to the east. The project area ranges in slope from flat to very steep with elevation ranges from 4,000 – 6,800 feet, and average annual precipitation of 12 inches at the lower elevations on the east side of the project to 55 inches in the higher elevations of the project. The wet season produces vegetation growth that may be subject to seasonal drought, and prone to fire. California native plants have evolved with relatively frequent fires, and in many cases require fire or fire byproducts to remain healthy or to reproduce. This fire history includes lightning and anthropogenic sources, and it is certainly true for the project area. Frequent burning by local Indigenous peoples created a landscape that was fire-maintained by low to moderate intensity fires that self regulated. Forest/Woodland conditions were historically open with grass and herbaceous undergrowth and scattered shrubs, which resulted in a fire resistant and resilient landscape. While fire suppression policies have been in place for more than a century, there is a history of wildfires and prescribed burns within the project area. The project recently burned in the Dixie Fire (2021), cause by faulty PG&E powerlines. The fires had variable effects on vegetation within the landscape, with the majority burning at high severity. The project area lies within a wildland urban interface zone (WUI), which is an area where human habitation is mixed with areas of flammable wildland vegetation. The purpose of this CEQA evaluation is to analyze the potential environmental impacts of restoring forest and woodland habitat impacted by the Dixie Fire.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Portions of the project area have high densities of drought- and fire-killed standing trees in forest stands that generally were denser than the natural range of variation. In the proposed treatment area, a mosaic burn pattern resulted from the recent fires including unburned to low severity, low severity, with the majority of the project area burning at moderate severity to high fire severity. As a result, in some areas, tree mortality is 100 percent, while other areas still support a green forest. This range of fire severity leaves the existing landscape with a wide range of potential fire behavior depending on vegetation burn severity, fuel loading changes from dead and dying trees, and the regrowth of non-forest vegetation over time.

Literature indicates that post-disturbance fuel loadings are expected to be extreme in many portions of the project area. A recent study (Fettig et al. 2019, updated by Homicz 2022) of ponderosa pine stands in the central and southern Sierra Nevada found significant increases in fuel loadings caused by severe drought followed by western pine beetle outbreak. The study included plots on the Eldorado, Stanislaus, Sierra, and Sequoia National Forests. Fallen dead trees were the largest class size of surface fuels and were the primary driver of fuel load increases. These data indicated extreme surface fuel loadings in these areas prior to recent wildfires or treatment. The Eldorado had a total average of 279 to 384 tons per acre; the Stanislaus had 292 to 340 tons per acre; the Sierra was the highest at 376 to 428 tons per acre; and the Sequoia had 269 to 276 tons per acre.

In dry forest such as in the Sierra Nevada, high to extreme fire hazard potential exists when downed coarse woody debris (materials with a diameter of 3 inches or greater) exceeds 30 to 40 tons per acre. The range of woody debris larger than 3 inches in diameter considered optimal is between 5 and 20 tons per acre. This balances acceptable risks of fire hazards and fire severity while at the same time providing desirable quantities of ground cover for soil productivity, soil protection, and wildlife needs. A wildfire with fuel loadings greater than this range could create control problems, higher suppression costs, and higher smoke emissions (Brown et al. 2003).

CURRENT LAND USE AND PREVIOUS IMPACTS

Until the late nineteenth century, the site was primarily used by Indigenous peoples as part of their daily lives. They maintained open, sunny mixed conifer/oak woodland conditions with regular, low-intensity fire. Brush communities were maintained in a fine grain mosaic interspersed with grasses and forbs. Collectively, these fire maintained areas achieved numerous ecocultural objectives including high-quality food, medicine, and fiber. The tending to these places was disrupted by American settlement. In the late 1800s and 1900s, the site was considered valuable timberland, as well as cattle and sheep ranching land. . Lands within the project area are used for full and part time residence, recreation, timber management, agriculture, wildlife habitat, and watershed protection.

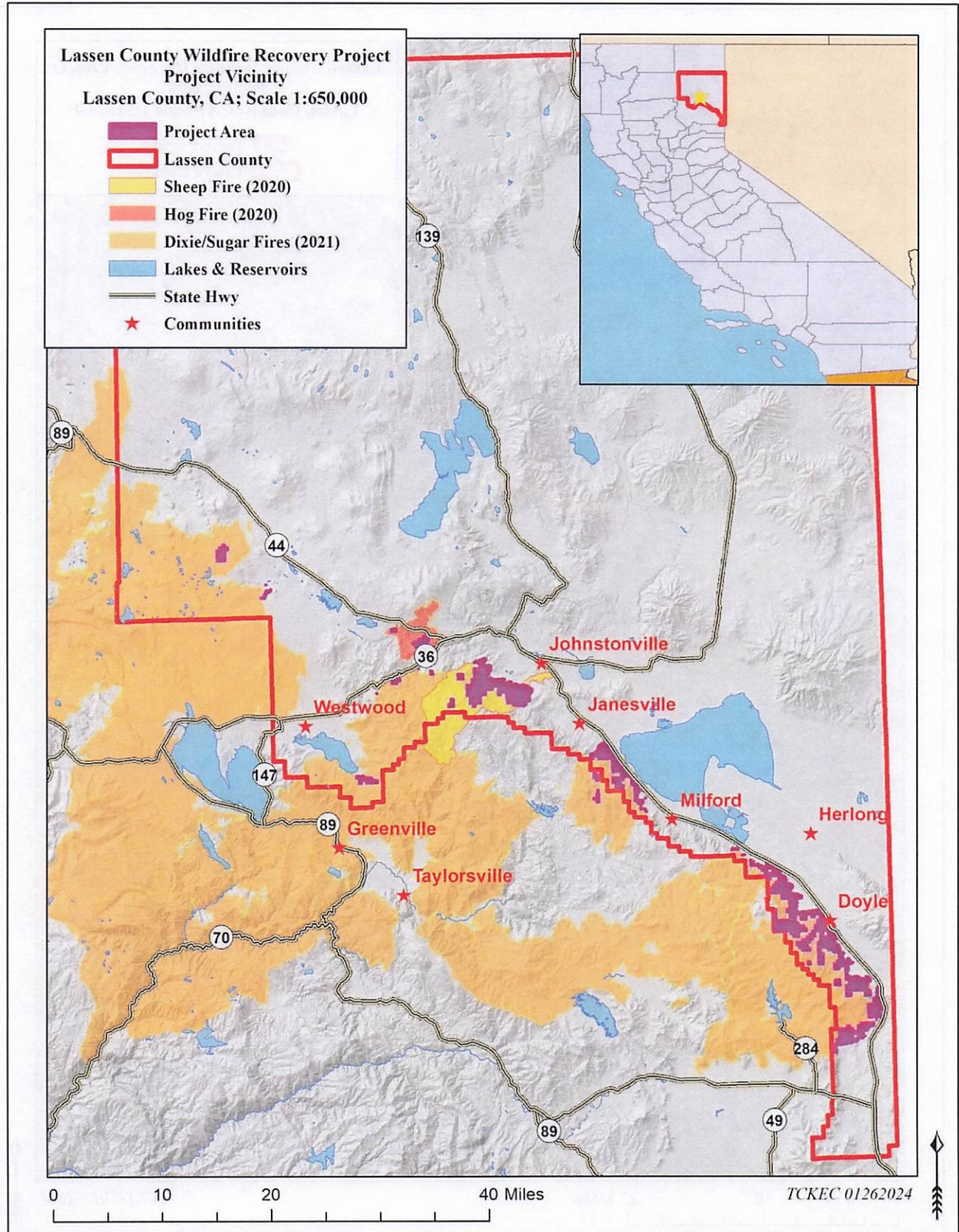


Figure 1: Lassen County Wildfire Recovery Project Vicinity

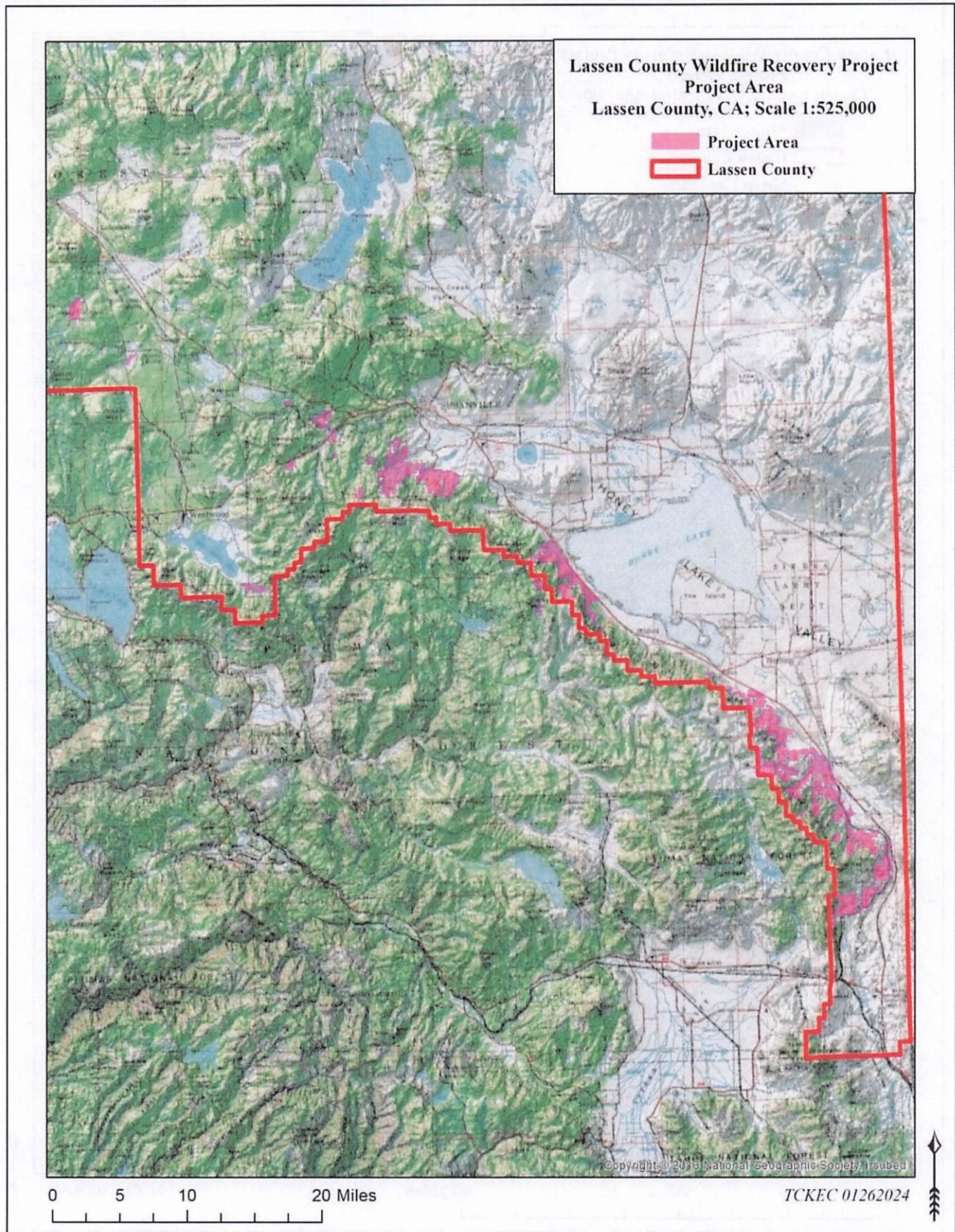


Figure 2: Lassen County Wildfire Recovery Project Location.